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FAMILY ALBUM

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FAMILY ALBUM

The conception of my thesis show was a gradual process. During my first year at R.I.T, I lacked a specific direction. I had not made photographs on any regular basis for years before I entered graduate school. The problem of the development of a style, the choice and treatment of subject matter, was difficult because I did not have a current body of work to respond to, make choices about as to which images were most meaningful. During this first year at R.I.T, I tried a number of different approaches: color photography, black and white landscapes, abstract graphic shapes, etc. I was intimidated by my lack of a specific direction and had trouble photographing anything. The resolution to this problem of the conception of my show and a visual style is indicated in the following quote from Paul Strand: "Above all, look at the things around you, the immediate world around you. If you are alive, it will mean something to you, and if you care about photography, you will want to photograph that meaningfulness."¹

"Photographing that meaningfulness" was the key to the development of my visual style. For me, this "meaningfulness" is rooted in a dynamic intimacy with other people - my family and friends. As I say in my thesis proposal: "My primary interest in photography is in making pictures of people that I am close to; a sort of family album." The goal of my photographs of people is to reveal inner dimensions of both them and myself, dimensions co-existing with external space and time. The synthesis of subject (myself) and object (person or persons photographed) and the synthesis of space and time that a photograph represents is for me very much part of the magic of the process.

My first idea about the project had to do with my immediate family: my mother, father, sister, brother, and wife. I wanted to present them in terms of recent photographs and also past images taken from a large collection of family pictures. I thought of a video component to the show which would make it possible for me to show many of these old photos. I did put together a sequence of about thirty photographs that were taken by my father as a study for this video.

The project evolved into a concept including family and close friends, in part because my mother and brother died during this time, and because the proper presentation of family photographs involved a lot of "curatorial" work that didn't really interest me that much. I wanted to concentrate on developing a new body of work and structure a show out of this.

In producing my show I worked in two different traditions, the "snap shot" and large format portraiture. In the snapshot style, using 35mm, one may say, the photographer views the world with the eye of a movie camera, in visual sequence. The film frames he or she selects are the most meaningful arrangements of form and space. The snapshot mode is very appealing in that one can take a lot of photographs very quickly. I feel I have a tendency to arrange things statically. Working quickly with objects in motion limits the arranging I can do, leads to more spontaneous composition. I'm not talking about a lack of control, but a different kind of control. I usually don't remember the specific images until I see them on the contact sheet, because the configuration on the view finder is changing too quickly. Over the years, including during the thesis project, I've gone to progressively wider angle optics, from 50mm to 35mm, 28mm, and 24mm. The wider angle lens gives a

greater sense of space, increased depth of field and image sharpness. The 35mm images in the show were enlarged to 16 X 20. Beyond that I feel they start to come apart a bit.

The 8X10 camera format, due to longer exposure times, usually records more static situations, though not necessarily creating a static visual structure. The 8 X10 negative, of course, yields a much sharper image when enlarged. The camera, when focused towards infinity, holds the space together much better. I don't believe in pandering to public expectation but the tone and detail of a 20" X 24" print from an 8" X 10" negative does satisfy an expectation for the "fine print." For exhibition, big is better. I would enlarge to more than 20 X 24, but when you go beyond this size, processing becomes very difficult.

Joel Meyerowitz talks about using both of the above formats: "the 8" X 10" ...isn't as flexible and responsive as a small camera, so by the camera's nature, you photograph differently. The subject matter changes. Things become more stately, or more still in some way...I still use the 35mm almost daily but I've learned to use two different instruments, to play two different kinds of music, to experience two different feelings about time. One is about duration, and the other is about instantaneity."²

Inherent in my photography is a tradition, a source. This tradition is both historic and contemporary. On the contemporary side, work that has helped shape my point of view is that of J. H. Lartique, Paul Strand, Bill Brandt, and Emmet Gowin. I also like very much the work of Edward Hopper, his use of the figure and the space around it.

Strand , in his reaction to pictorialism, emphasizes the objectivity of the medium of photography. This objective, documentary quality is for me one of the most appealing qualities of the process. Lartique's book "The Photography of J. H. Lartique" was influential in the concept of my show. Much of the book consists of photographs of family members. The pictures are pasted onto the pages of the book as in a family album and are accompanied by hand written notes. Bill Brandt, my favorite photographer, uses the figure and space in an extremely expressive and original way. His work provides an interesting contrast to Strand's "objectivity". Gowin's show of his family in the early 1970's was simply one of the best shows I've ever seen. I view his work as a partial synthesis of the snapshot and large format traditions. His use of wide angle 4x5 optics allows him to get depth of field while using a relatively fast shutter speed.

On the historical side, let me name some high points of the Western artistic and Intellectual tradition that stand out as important to my work.

Aesthetically I describe what I do with pictures as "environmental portraiture" (And also because a lot of my work isn't portraiture), as "placing the figure in a perspective grid of space." I'm always working within this grid of space. Space may be characterized in many ways. Quantitatively, it's most profound expression is the Pythagorean theorem, $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$, the law of the symmetry of plane space, the most important theorem in mathematics. This understanding of an underlying numerical structure of space, combined with the Arab mathematician Alhazen's concept of a cone of rays emanating from the object to the eye becomes the foundation of perspective . 3

Qualitatively, space assumes the character of the combined relationships of the objects that fill it. This plasticity of form, color, texture, and light and shadow is infinite.

Max Beckmann, the German painter, writes: " my aim is to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into painting--to make the invisible visible through reality. It may sound paradoxical but it is reality that forms the mystery of our existence. What helps me most in this task is the penetration of space. Height, width, and depth are phenomena which I must transfer into one plane to form the abstract surface of the picture, and thus protect myself from infinity of space. All these things come to me in black and white...only in the two ...can I see God as a unity creating again and again a great and eternally changing terrestrial drama."4 The abstraction of space both quantitatively and qualitatively is a major element in my photography.

Photographs are also abstractions of time, bits of time separated from a time continuum.

As far as the taking of photographs is concerned, I don't think time is particularly significant to the way I make images: sometimes I use my cameras, sometimes I don't. The element of time becomes most dominant for me when I am trying to structure those bits of time, make specific choices about sequencing. In general, I feel there is both a linear and a circular quality to time and that both these elements play a role in one's choices about sequencing.

In my work the images usually resolve themselves into groups of two to five or six. There are many bases for these groups, and these are usually

spontaneously arrived at during the process of hanging the show. For example, a group of two can be two frames next to each other on a roll of film. A pair can be photographed years apart and have a very different subject matter, but have a similar feel. And so on -.

One of the main things I learned in the installation of my show was that it is good to have professionals on hand to help you at this point. Often the artist is just too tired from having had to meet the production quota for the show and can not get much distance from the work. Dave Joseph, a fellow MFA candidate and my wife and I did the sequencing for the show. The sequencing of images is crucial to the vitality of the show. The other elements in my show were a table with one of my family's photo albums on it (which introduced another photo sequence), some poetry by my brother on the same table, a diagram of my family tree and a short story that I wrote. The story was introduced to provide a further counterpoint to the images.

Having just hung another show, I'm very much struck by how viewing the whole of the parts of the installation becomes an experience much greater than seeing the elements individually. David Smith writes:" Rarely the Grand Conception, but a preoccupation with parts. I start with one part, then a unit of parts, until a whole appears. Parts have unities and associations and separate after images - even when they are no longer parts but a whole. The after image of parts lie back on the horizon, very distant cousins to the image formed by the finished work. The order of the whole can be perceived, but not planned...when I work, there is no consciousness of ideals - but intuition and impulse."5

This intuition and impulse are very much apart of my working method; I'm not much of a planner.

As far as audience response to the show is concerned, I felt I got across what I wanted to: a sense of the magic of life and how my life is connected to other people and places. Now that I'm able to put the show in the perspective of both time - it's been almost four years - and another show, I feel that the relationship between the 35mm images and 8" X 10" images could have been stronger in that the cinematic point of view could have been better represented. It is to this cinematic point of view that I look for new directions in my work, for a different treatment of form and space. There's a pattern to what I do with form and space. Generally I try to make full use of foreground, middleground, and background. I like to photograph single and multiple figures. Presently I'm thinking I can do more with multiple figures, more with large format.

As far as technique is concerned, I use Tri-x film developed in D-76 1 to 1. Paper was Brovira or Poly fiber, developed in Ektaflo type I. Some selenium toning was done.

For me, the most important thing about my thesis show was that it got me started on the right track. It gave me a lot of confidence. The subject matter of my work is still the same: friends and family (with an occasional still life). But everytime one is involved in getting a show together things are different. For example, my last show, which went up January 1988, contained a lot of very recent work, most of which was 35mm. I think I'm ready to try some 8x10's next.

FOOTNOTES

1 Strand, Paul. *The British Journal of Photography*, vol. 70 p. 15.

2 Meyerowitz, Joel. from P.A. Burzynski's notes. Source unknown.

3 Bronowsky, Jacob. *The Ascent of Man*. Little, Brown. Boston, Toronto. 1973.
p.179.

4 Beckmann, Max. *Theories of Modern Art*. Univeristy of California Press.
Berkeley 1968.pp187-88.

5 Smith, David. *ibid.* p.577.

THESIS PROPOSAL

I. Statement of Purpose

My primary interest in photography is in making pictures of people that I am close to; a sort of extended "family album." Paul Strand talks about photographing the meaningfulness of the world. The meaning of the world to me is rooted in my family and friends, reveals itself in dynamic intimacy with others.

I will be documenting this extended family in the environments in which they live. The goal of my photographs of people is to reveal their inner dimension, a dimension which co-exists with external space and time.

II. Background

I learned a great deal in viewing last year's thesis shows. I thought the most successful presentations were the ones that went beyond the standard approach of just putting photographs on the wall. Writings created an exciting counterpoint to the visual images, as in Larry Lean's and J.P. DeBattice's shows.

Paul Strand writes: "I think that text which is contrapuntal to the photographs, but doesn't necessarily say the same thing but something related, is much richer as a form."

Among my sources, inspirations, are artists such as J. H. Lartique, Paul Strand, Bill Brandt, Emmet Gowin, and Edward Hopper.

III. Procedure

I will work in several different traditions: the snapshot and large format portraiture. In the snapshot style, the photographer views the world with the eye of a movie camera...in visual sequence. The frames, the snapshots he or she selects are the most meaningful arrangements of form and space. The large format camera, due to the longer exposure times, tends to record more static forms, though not necessarily creating a static visual structure.

I approach formal portraiture from two points of view. One is looking at a person in close so that the background of the figure is secondary to the feeling of the person. The second is farther back from the figure where the space and environment around the person play a much greater role, as in many paintings by Edward Hopper. The space and environment are viewed as extensions of what is going on in the person's mind and feelings...within their personal space.

I conceive of my thesis show as an installation piece. I would like photographs and writings to be "on the wall" but also to move "off the wall," giving the space of the gallery a richer texture by incorporating three dimensional objects.

Max Beckmann writes that the penetration of space, the third dimension, is the most important part of his search for the inner reality, the fourth dimension. With this work, I hope to express my feelings and my personal sense of space.

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photo

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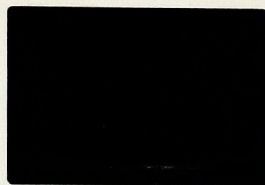
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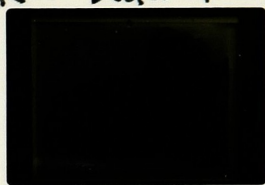
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"eug" 16x20, gelatin
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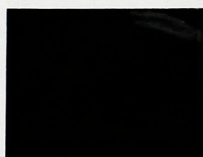


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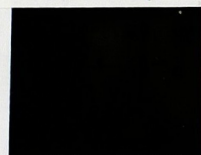
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"eugene" 16x24
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